

**REMARKS OF
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TAKING THE PULSE OF
THE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA
HISPANIC HERITAGE FOUNDATION
WASHINGTON, DC
APRIL 29, 2015**

Good afternoon. Thank you to the Hispanic Heritage Foundation, My College Options, and Family Online Safety Institute for having me here today.

Let me start by congratulating you on your study. The research you have done is so important. But it is also bone chilling. Because it clearly demonstrates that we have work to do if we want all students to have a fair shot in the digital age. And that fair shot is what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about what I call the Homework Gap.

Now when I was growing up, homework required nothing more than your siblings leaving you alone, a clear workspace, and a Number 2 pencil.

No more. Today, as many as seven in ten teachers assign homework that requires access to broadband. But data where I work—the FCC—suggests that as many as one in three households do not subscribe to broadband service.

Think about those numbers. Where they overlap is what I call the Homework Gap—and according to the Pew Research Center the Homework Gap is real. Five million households of the 29 million with school-aged children are falling into this gap.

So imagine for moment that you are a student in a household without broadband. Just getting basic schoolwork done is hard. Applying for a scholarship is challenging. And while low-income families are adopting smartphones with Internet access at high rates, let me submit to you that a phone is just not how you want to research and type a paper, apply for jobs, or further your education.

But as your study shows—that is exactly what is happening. Latinos and African Americans are most likely to use a smartphone to complete a homework assignment—because they have no other options. And overall, nearly 50 percent of students say they have been unable to complete a homework assignment because they didn't have access to the Internet or a computer. On top of that, 42 percent of students say they received a lower grade on an assignment because they didn't have access to the Internet.

We can do better than this. We must. Because students who lack regular broadband access are struggling to keep up—and their lack of access is holding our education system back. In fact, according to the Pew Research Center more than half of teachers in low-income communities have said that their students' lack of access to online resources at home presents a major challenge to integrating technology into their teaching.

That's a problem because one-half of all jobs now require some level of digital skills. By the end of the decade, that number will be 77 percent. School-aged kids without broadband access at home are not only unable to complete their homework, they enter the job market with a serious handicap. And that loss is more than individual. It's a loss to our collective human capital and shared economic future that we need to address.

If soapbox statistics don't make this clear, stories will.

So imagine Citronelle, Alabama. It takes less than an hour to get there from Mobile. It's a city of 4,000 people. After school, students head to McDonalds. They head to a fast food restaurant because it is one of the few places in town with Wi-Fi. So students who do not have broadband at home hunker down in the booths to do their homework. They research and write their papers with fizzy drinks and a side of fries.

In Pinconning, Michigan, near Saginaw Bay, one fast food franchisee says he can tell when exams are coming up in the local school district. That's because students without online access at home file into his restaurant with laptops in tow. Those who cannot afford food or drink simply sit with their devices in the parking lot. Often their parents drive them there, doing what they can on limited incomes to help their children complete basic school assignments.

In Cutler Bay, Florida, just south of Miami, parents of young kids who lack broadband at home shuffle into the library. Then they queue up for computers to get their children time online to do their schoolwork. The lines are long, the wait times tough. But the need is real—because there are Miami-Dade county high schools that use digital history textbooks and elementary schools that use a math program that requires online access.

These students in Alabama, Michigan, and Florida are the lucky ones. They might not have broadband at home but with grit, ingenuity, and the help of their parents they have found ways to cobble together the connectivity they need to get their schoolwork done. But it's hard.

Earlier this year, the Southern Education Foundation published some startling statistics. They found that for the first time in our nation's history, more than half of the students in public school are from low-income households. Across the board, these households are much less likely to subscribe to broadband. From where I sit, that's a clarion call. The Homework Gap is going to get worse unless we take steps to bridge this new digital divide.

So what can we do? There is no one single silver bullet or quick fix. It is going to take a lot of cooperative effort and a bunch of creative ideas. Here are mine.

First, we have a program at the FCC called Lifeline. It's a program that got its start back three decades ago in 1985. That was when most communications involved a cord and President Ronald Regan was in the White House. Today, the Lifeline program supports telephone access in 14 million low-income households across the country. But it needs a reboot. We need to modernize it. Instead of having the program only support voice service, we should allow participants to choose between applying the same support to either voice service or broadband

service. This simple change would both update the program and help bring more broadband to low-income households with school-aged children.

Second, we need more Wi-Fi. Wi-Fi is an essential onramp to Internet connectivity. More than half of us online have relied on public Wi-Fi. But for many low-income households it is their only means of getting online. So having more Wi-Fi in more places will mean more opportunities for students to get their schoolwork done.

Third, we need to keep tabs on innovative broadband access programs all across the country—and no shame, copy them. In New York, for instance, the public library has a pilot program that lends out wireless hotspots. Last I checked, they had been loaned out 1700 times. Think about what that hotspot can mean for a student who needs online access to complete schoolwork. It's the difference between keeping up in class and falling behind.

In California, the Coachella school district superintendent got really innovative. Now Coachella is probably best known for a music festival. But in fact, it's a community built on agriculture. More than half of the students are not fluent in English—they come from Spanish-speaking homes and their parents are migrant farm workers. But when the school superintendent came up with a program to give every child—every child—a tablet for use at school and home, he found he had a problem. Students sat by his office every day as late as 6 PM with devices in hand, because it was one of the only places they had to get a reliable signal to do basic homework. His students were falling into the Homework Gap. But the school came up with an innovative way to get them out. They installed Wi-Fi routers on district school buses. After all, in this rural area, students often ride buses an hour just to get to school—and an hour to get home at night. With Wi-Fi on board, they can make this ride connected time for homework. Even better, the school system parks buses next to some of the most remote trailer parks in the district, leaving the routers on so students least likely to have broadband at home have yet another way to connect.

I think if we are all creative like Coachella—at the federal, state, and local level—and in the public sector and private sector, we are going to find ways to close the Homework Gap. I know it won't be easy. But we should go for it.

Now is not a moment too soon. Because this is about the future. The future of our economy, our country, and our success is built on a digital and diverse workforce. We all know science, technology, engineering, and math are the fastest growing fields in the economy. We also know the diversity of our STEM workforce does not mirror the diversity of our population. It's time to fix this and make our kids—all of our kids—not just digital consumers, but digital creators. And there are a lot of things we can do to make this happen. But a small step, and one we can take right now—is to make it possible for all students to do their homework. Because the Homework Gap is the cruelest part of our new digital divide—but it is within our power to bridge it.

So thank you for your study today and thank you to everyone here for the terrific work you do to expand opportunity and access.