**Fiscal Facts: Wisconsin’s digital divide and its impacts on learning**

As the COVID-19 pandemic spurs Wisconsin schools to undertake an unprecedented exercise in virtual and distance learning, it also threatens to exacerbate the “digital divide” between students who have fast, reliable at-home internet access and those who do not. Data shows these children are in both cities and rural areas, and are disproportionately low-income and students of color.

About one-third of all school districts report that at least a quarter of their students do not “have enough internet access at home to complete homework assignments and other school-related activities,” according to survey data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. These students without reliable internet access risk falling behind in classes that have moved online, potentially widening existing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps.

DPI survey results collected in 2019 show a difference in internet access depending on district size, with larger districts reporting greater access. Most concerning, nearly 10% of districts overall said fewer than half of their students have adequate internet access.

When asked about the reasons for their students’ lack of internet access, 45.5% of all districts cited cost as the reason at least half of their students who were without internet lacked access. A racial divide in broadband access is also evident. U.S. Census Bureau data shows that statewide, 13.6% of black residents and 11% of Hispanic/Latinx residents lack broadband access. For white residents, the statewide average is 5.8%.

The digital divide has long been significant, but recent events underscore its importance. It now can determine which students have a seat in their new virtual classroom and which are left to fend for themselves.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at wispolicyforum.org.*