

All Ohio Students Deserve Broadband Access

Linda Haycock | Member, Ohio State Board of Education

As children all over our state transitioned to online learning this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, one thing became clear: every student needs access to reliable, fast-speed broadband. And yet for too many of our children and families, access to the Internet remains out of reach, particularly in rural communities.

As a member of the Ohio State Board of Education and former President of the Lima Shawnee Local Board of Education, I have seen firsthand how critical broadband access is to a successful educational experience for students, especially now during the COVID-19 pandemic. While school districts all across our state have scrambled to adjust to and accommodate online learning platforms by providing technological tools and hot spots for students, it is clear that in some parts of Ohio the digital divide is too large of an issue for teachers, administrators, and community members to bridge on their own. As a result, students lacking reliable internet service are finding themselves at risk of falling academically behind their classmates who have broadband access.

The digital divide in Ohio has caused these significant educational inequities in our state. However, the inequities can be addressed with private sector or government support. One critical step toward addressing the currently unserved communities in our state would be the passage of HB 13 in the Ohio General Assembly.

HB 13, which has already passed in the House of Representatives and has support from the DeWine administration, creates a smart, competitive, and taxpayer-friendly grant program that would accelerate investments in broadband projects connecting rural and currently unserved areas of Ohio. The bill ensures that every dollar invested in this critical infrastructure will actually help connect more students, homes, and businesses. For example, it addresses various regulatory and financial barriers that currently stand in the way of constructing more high-risk “last-mile” broadband infrastructure. HB 13 institutes a fairer and faster procedure for broadband providers to attach new cables to utility poles, eliminating unnecessary delays and unpredictable costs.

This past year has proven just how critical broadband access is for our educational system. For students, reliable, fast-speed internet access means the difference between being able to attend classes and complete homework and falling behind their peers. While there is not one “fix-all” solution to address the digital divide, HB 13’s proposals, taken together, serve as a critical starting point to increase broadband build-out to reach our students and families in the most rural and unserved communities.

I am grateful that the Ohio House of Representatives has already passed the bill and I strongly encourage the State Senate to follow. Internet access should be a tool enjoyed by every child student across Ohio – especially when it comes to their education. All Ohio students deserve access to reliable broadband.

Linda Haycock currently serves as the elected representative from District 1 on the Ohio State Board of Education. District 1 encompasses Allen, Auglaize, Champaign, Crawford, Dark, Defiance, Hancock,

Hardin, Henry, Logan, Marion, Mercer, Morrow, Paulding, Putnam, Sandusky, Seneca, Shelby, Union, Van Wert, Williams, Wyandot and parts of Fulton Counties.