ConnectHome

Playbook 11: Partnering with Schools

Closing the "homework gap"

Schools now use the Internet to facilitate instruction, assign homework, and share essential information with students and families, including grades, progress reports, and service opportunities. A lack of Internet connectivity at home creates serious learning challenges for students, while hindering parents from following their children's progress.

Collaboration between public housing agencies and school districts can overcome this **"homework gap."** Some of the ways that school districts can support your efforts to encourage home Internet adoption include:

- ➔ **Identifying students** who are unconnected at home and determining their eligibility for discounted Internet service
- ➔ **Providing computers, tablets, or wireless hotspots** for students to bring home
- ➔ **Promoting partners, organizations, and events** with free and low-cost offers
- ➔ **Educating families** about the benefits of digital inclusion (parents are more likely to sign up for low-cost Internet options when they learn about the benefits for their children)

Working with "Future Ready Schools"

Thousands of school districts across the country have signed the Future Ready Schools Pledge and are ready to partner with you to promote digital inclusion. Launched in 2014 by the U.S. Department of Education and the nonprofit Alliance for Excellent Education, the initiative helps school districts prepare students for educational and employment success in the 21st Century.

One of the principles at the core of Future Ready Schools is that high-quality digital content should be accessible not only at school ***but also*** **in homes and communities**. Because of their commitment to improving student access to computers and high-speed Internet at home, Future Ready Schools are ideal partners for closing the "homework gap" in ConnectHome communities.

Case Study

New York, NY

Library Hotspots

New York City (NYC) Public Schools partnered with three public library systems, Google, and Sprint to make 5,000 free wireless hotspots available to NYC public school students who do not have Internet access at home.

The program enables eligible families to "check out" the wireless hotspot from the library for the school year at no cost, bring the hotspot home, and connect their computer or tablet to access free wireless Internet service. The program is designed to help NYC public school students access online resources at home and raise their digital exposure and confidence.

The initiative launched in 46 library branches throughout NYC, most of which are located in high-need neighborhoods with low Internet connectivity rates. Coordination efforts are run through Community Schools, which are neighborhood hubs where families can access social services and students can receive supplemental instruction. Hundreds of families living in HUD-assisted housing in New York City have been benefitted from the program so far.

Case Study

Charlotte, NC

ONE Access

In 2015 the City of Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg (CMS) accepted the White House's ConnectED Library Challenge to facilitate students' access to information and educational resources outside the classroom. Partnering with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Library, they established the ONE Access initiative.

One Number Equals (ONE) Access uses students' school identification numbers instead of separate library cards. With their school ID, students can access library research databases, borrow digital materials, and check out print or audio books. In its first year, over 100,000 students—nearly 2 in 3 across the entire school district—accessed library services through ONE Access.

Last fall, CMS and the Library launched the ONE Access and Student Mobile Hotspot Lending pilot program with Sprint to offer wireless hotspot modems to students who lack an Internet connection at home. Students can go to their local library and use their ONE Access Account to check out one of 150 free available wireless hotspots for up to 30 days, just like checking out a book. This pilot program is designed to be a catalyst for future initiatives that encourage students' exploration of digital resources and enable them to work on assignments outside of school.

KEYS:
Partnering with your local school district

KEY 1: Focus on shared goals

In your initial conversations with schools, keep digital equity front and center. Ask school personnel about the academic challenges faced by students who lack home Internet access. Learn about their parent communication strategies and how home Internet access might improve the home-school connection.

KEY 2: Get to know school leadership

When working with school districts, get to know the following key players:

- **Superintendents:** This individual could be your best access point. The Superintendent will help you identify the best points of contact at specific schools.
- **Chief Information and Technology Officers (CIOs / CTOs):** In large school districts, there is often a designated CIO or CTO. They may be a good initial contact because of their specialized knowledge and responsibilities.
- **School Principals:** The principal is the chief administrator of a school and can be a good starting point for engagement. School principals are most likely to have personal relationships with families in HUD-assisted housing.

KEY 3: Partner with Parent-Teacher Associations

Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) members are actively engaged with their school communities and can be powerful allies in your relationship-building efforts. Collaborating with PTAs allows you to leverage their existing relationships, communication channels, and human capital.

TIPS →

Personal connections are crucial for success. Emails and phone calls can be a starting point, but in-person conversations are the most effective.

Tour your local schools. Learn how they use technology in the classroom to discover potential areas for collaboration.

Be persistent.
If you are unable to connect with the right school official initially, don't give up. Particularly in a large district, you may have to talk to several people before you find the best point of contact to support a joint connectivity initiative.

Case Study

Atlanta, GA

Atlanta Public Schools

Atlanta Public Schools have played a central role in Atlanta's ConnectHome initiative.

- To connect students who were either English-language learners or participating in the Centers for Hope afterschool program, the school district mobilized its resources and staff to **identify eligible students**.
- School staff then reached out to identified families to **communicate** the families' eligibility for free Internet-enabled tablets and other important program information.
- To improve the educational utility of the tablets provided to students, the school district customized the tablets by **pre-installing apps** for the district's online parent and student portals. Through these portals, students can access homework assignments, and parents can access their children's attendance reports and grades, and communicate with teachers and school leaders.
- Once the free tablets were distributed, school district staff **trained** students and parents on how to effectively use them.