

Press Room

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Educators See a New Digital Divide Among America's Children

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Among children, the murky chasm known as the "digital divide" seems to be narrowing. Nearly every child in the country has access to a computer, whether at home, school or elsewhere.

But some educators say there is another abyss that transcends mere access to technology. They say it affects subgroups within schools, including minority students, rural children, girls, students with disabilities and pupils who speak English as their second language.

The key is whether and how kids use computers outside school.

"Any teacher will tell you, you can tell the difference between children who have access at home and those who don't," said Jane Patterson, executive director of North Carolina's Rural Internet Access Authority, which has helped connect remote parts of the state to the Internet. "They can see that advantage in class."

With school out for summer – removing many youngsters from the only place they use computers – some organizations are offering children of the new divide continued instruction and encouragement.

On a June morning at the Capital Children's Museum in Washington, a mobile computer lab in a gutted school bus captivated D'Angelo Brevard, 9, who doesn't have a computer at home.

He fiddled with a keyboard as cartoon characters sang in rhyme, part of an early reading program promoted by Electronic Education of Scottsdale, Ariz. The publisher plans to tour the bus around the country during the school break, partly to help keep children's computer skills sharp.

D'Angelo just thinks it's fun: "You can do whatever you want. It's like a game."



At Washington's Capital Children's Museum, children approach the eBus, a traveling computer lab run by Electronic Education, a publisher in Scottsdale, Ariz. The company brings the bus to low-income neighborhoods, where some children do not have computers at home.

(Photo by Mark Abraham)

Nine in 10 children ages 5 to 17 use computers, according to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration. The federal agency also reports that during 2000-2001, Internet use increased by at least a quarter and as much as a third among people in households earning less than \$15,000 a year, among blacks and Hispanics, and among people living in rural areas.

Those statistics have complicated the discussion of the digital divide. President Bush's proposed budget for fiscal 2003 would cut programs that help low-income and rural residents get access to technology. Consumer groups argue that there is nonetheless a continuing need.

Susan Van Zant, principal of Meadowbrook Middle School in Poway, Calif., knows this first hand.

About half the 200 Spanish-speaking students at Meadowbrook don't speak English, Van Zant said. They don't have computers at home, and their parents, often low-earning immigrants with little or no education, can't help.

"That presents a problem," she said. "They fall behind."

Van Zant said the school offers smaller classes for those children, so teachers can give them more attention, and the school's computers are available after hours. But, she said, engaging those students is a constant challenge.

For Love of Children, a community organization in Washington, wrestled with how to draw girls into technology. Richard Jaeggi, director of the group's technology center, noticed that boys consistently staked claim to the fastest computers, leaving girls with slower and less effective equipment.

"It's a stereotype, but I think there's truth to it," Jaeggi said. "The boys are more competitive, and the girls are more cooperative."

The organization developed a girls' digital journalism workshop to give girls the run of the computer lab and exposure to video editing and Web design programs they had never used before.

Sparkle Perry, 13, surprised herself by producing stories on dog behavior and on the local aquarium. "I didn't know I could do that," said Sparkle, who is toying with the idea of becoming a videographer.

That sense of purpose is essential, said Jean Wunder, education coordinator for Learning Independence Through Computers, a non-profit resource center in Baltimore for people with disabilities.

Wunder said some children with disabilities need specific programs or adjustments to use computers. There is software that reads text on the screen for children who cannot

see and a keyboard that accommodates children with motor impairments. But, using those aids can make it hard to keep up with the rest of the class, she said.

The Children's Partnership, a non-profit research organization based in Santa Monica, Calif., reported this month that online content falls short for "underserved" Americans, including the subgroups of children on the disadvantaged side of the new divide. The group concluded that such users wanted online information at a basic reading level, text in other languages, content easily accessible to people with disabilities, and help with using the Internet.

"There's clearly a gap in terms of the amount of coaching and help children get in underserved communities," said Wendy Lazarus, co-director of the partnership.

Lazarus and others say computers must have meaning for kids as tools for living, not just games.

At Playing2Win, a community-based technology center in New York, children work at different levels according to skill, not necessarily age or grade. Ka Ogunka, program director, said children who can't type are put on a typing program. Children who read poorly work with literacy software. She said basic skills need to be met to use the computer effectively.

Ogunka said this kind of instruction is only possible at the center, with volunteers who help children one-on-one. She said schools often don't have the resources to give children similar assistance.

"We have to find something for the child that's instructive, that allows them to grow in their own realm," Ogunka said. "Unless they have people to give them that special attention, they are going to fall in that digital gap."

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