

Your Question:

How have states sought to expand broadband access during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Our Response:

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have led many states to invest funds into remote learning and broadband expansion efforts. In the following section, we provide information on how states have utilized federal funding toward broadband access and remote learning expansion; examples of state policies utilizing state funds to expand student broadband access; and other policy examples regarding broadband expansion efforts more generally.

Use of CARES Act Federal Funding

In March 2020, the federal government passed the [Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security \(CARES\) Act](#) to help stimulate the economy and support state and local governments. Within this, \$3 billion was directed to governors in the [Governor's Emergency Education Relief \(GEER\) Fund](#) for discretionary educational use.

This recent influx of federal money to the states may be a particularly rich resource to examine state use of funding toward student broadband expansion. According to [an analysis of states' GEER plans](#) from Future Ed and the Hunt Institute: 36 states have committed GEER funds to broadband expansion, 35 states have committed funds to remote training/curriculum and 34 states have committed funds to internet-capable devices.

Summaries of state GEER funding plans, along with links to their applications and other related resources, can be found [here](#). Two notable examples can be found below:

Alabama- Gov. Kay Ivey [announced](#) on July 31, 2020 that \$100 million of GEER funds would be allocated to fund [Alabama Broadband Connectivity \(ABC\) for Students](#). This program provides home internet access vouchers [for equipment and service](#) costs for families of students currently eligible for free and reduced-price lunch or meeting other income criteria through December 31, 2020.

Connecticut- Gov. Ned Lamont has combined GEER funding with other CARES Act funds for a [\\$43.5 million program](#) that will include investments for the purchase of 50,000 laptops, a year of at-home internet access for 60,000 students and the creation of 200 public hotspots.

State Legislation Addressing Student Broadband Expansion Funding

Education Commission of the States tracks and summarizes enacted and vetoed bills across all 50 states. These summaries can be found on [this interactive website](#) by selecting "Broadband Access" from the list of sub-issues. Examples of 2020 state policies include:

Massachusetts H 4932- This appropriations bill allocated \$50 million to a competitive matching grant program designed to assist public schools and districts in "improving student instruction and assessment through the use of information technology."

[Michigan SB 690](#) - This appropriations bill allocates \$25 million to the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators for a device purchasing program and distance learning. Funds are to be used for “coordinating and incentivizing strategic purchasing of devices” and to “address immediate access and connectivity issues for students, families, and community members who do not have internet access.”

Other State and Local Policies Addressing Broadband Expansion

The following examples showcase additional ways states and cities have invested in broadband expansion efforts over the past five years.

Chattanooga- In July 2020, the city of Chattanooga [announced](#) a partnership between the city, [the county school district](#), [the municipally-owned energy and internet provider](#) and community partners and foundations to provide free internet subscriptions and routers to all households with students who receive free or reduced-price lunch. This service is expected to provide internet access to 28,500 students and run over the next decade if anticipated funding levels are maintained.

Georgia- In 2018, Georgia enacted the [Achieving Connectivity Everywhere Act](#), which included provisions to create a detailed “map showing the unserved areas in the state” to inform future internet access expansion efforts. On June 30, 2020, that map was [made available online](#). One feature of note is [how the map differs](#) from the Federal Communications Commission’s internet service map: according to the department of community affairs’ [2020 Broadband Report](#), the map identified “12,316 unserved census blocks that were previously deemed ‘served’ by the FCC.”

New York City- The New York City Department of Education executed a [multi-phase roll-out](#) of their iPad distribution as part of their remote learning response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Priority was given to certain student populations, including students who reside in shelters, temporary housing and foster care, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, students in public housing, and students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch.

Tennessee- In 2017, the Tennessee [Legislature](#) authorized an internet infrastructure expansion grant program. [According to a Pew study](#), an intergovernmental report during implementation showed that in the newly expanded areas, there were still low rates of internet subscriptions. To remedy this, the application process has been altered to encourage grantees to incorporate efforts to increase subscription, such as low-income assistance and digital literacy programs.

Vermont- In 2019, the Vermont [Legislature created](#) the [Broadband Innovation Grant Program](#) to help communities fund feasibility studies and business plans for broadband expansion in rural, unserved and underserved areas of the state. The program awards up to \$60,000 to grantees, and if the feasibility study determines that a project would be [cash-flow positive within three years](#), the department of public service will request an actionable business plan from the grantee for consideration.

Virginia- [Virginia’s Telecommunication Initiative](#) (VATI) provides grants to localities to expand broadband, specifically by supplementing construction costs by private sector broadband service providers to extend service to areas that are unserved. Applications must come from government units who are partnered with a private sector provider. VATI was established in 2016 and is administered by the department of housing and community development. A summary of broadband-relevant legislation from 2008-2019 in Virginia can be found [here](#).

Additional Education Commission of the States Resources

- [Broadband Access and Implications for Efforts to Address Equity Gaps in Postsecondary Attainment](#)

Education Commission of the States strives to respond to information requests within 48 hours. This document reflects our best efforts but it may not reflect exhaustive research. Please let us know if you would like a more comprehensive response. Our staff is also available to provide unbiased advice on policy plans, consult on proposed legislation and testify at legislative hearings as third-party experts.

- This report focuses on access to infrastructure and ensuring availability of financial resources to enable broadband access. These two related but distinct challenges confront state policy leaders and students as they seek to leverage online distance education to meet personal and statewide education goals.
- [COVID-19 Update: State Policy Responses and Other Executive Actions to the Coronavirus in Public Schools](#)
 - This resource, which was last updated September 16, 2020, includes a wide range of information on school finance and virtual/hybrid learning as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- [Inhibiting Connection: State Policy Impacting Expansion of Municipal Broadband Networks](#)
 - This report explores the debate around municipal broadband expansion and examines state policies across the country that impact municipal broadband networks.
- [Key Issue: School Funding](#)
 - School funding is a key issue for education policy, and Education Commission of the States has a dedicated landing page with relevant resources. Our [50-State Comparison on K-12 funding](#) may be of particular interest.
- [Virtual School Policies](#)
 - This Policy Snapshot captures legislative activity from 2017 to 2019 pertaining to virtual schools. It organizes legislation into three common topic areas: attendance and engagement, authorizing and governance, and funding for virtual schools.

Other External Resources

- Common Sense Media and Boston Consulting Group, [“Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning,”](#) June 2020
 - This resource provides an analysis of how many students are without internet access. The information is broken down nationally, by state, by race/ethnicity and by urban/suburban/rural location.
- Congressional Research Service, [“State Broadband Initiatives: Selected State and Local Approaches as Potential Models for Federal Initiatives to Address the Digital Divide,”](#) April 2020
 - Although the intent of this report is to inform federal developments in the broadband expansion space, it contains useful information on state and local efforts.
- Pew Charitable Trusts, [How States Are Expanding Broadband Access](#), February 2020
 - This resource provides an overview and examples of several practices states have used to address broadband access expansion — stakeholder outreach and engagement, policy frameworks, planning and capacity building, funding and operations, and program evaluation and evolution.