

Developing Infrastructure to Support Equitable Digital Expansion in New Mexico

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Access to high-speed internet and digital devices has become a [necessity](#) for a modern education, but stark [disparities in access](#) persist for Indigenous students, Black students, Latine students, students from low-income backgrounds and students living in rural areas. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress' [2022 Reading Survey Questionnaire](#), 14% of fourth grade students overall — and 19% of those eligible for the National School Lunch Program — reported not having both internet access and a computer or tablet at home.

In recent years, many states have taken significant steps to remove barriers to remote learning and expand student access to internet and internet-enabled devices. Discrepancies in internet access were brought into sharp

relief by the shift to remote learning during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Policy efforts have focused primarily on three elements: availability of internet connections, affordability for low-income households and access to internet-enabled devices. State policy strategies are described in Education Commission of the States' [Broadband Access and the Digital Divides Policy Brief](#), Pew's [Strategies for Crafting Effective State Broadband Plans issue brief](#) and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology's [Home Access Playbook](#).

State Policy Strategies in New Mexico

New Mexico is one of many states that has sought to expand student internet and device access. [Roughly 91%](#) of New Mexicans fall within at least one of the populations that have historically experienced lower rates of computer and internet access. Accordingly, the state has enacted several bills to establish an infrastructure and policy ecosystem that supports and facilitates broadband access and device expansion, including the [Digital Equity in Education Act](#) in 2023. This bill requires all districts and charter schools to develop plans that describe how they are addressing digital equity among students, device replacement and repair processes and related services. This gives the state better understanding of where gaps still exist and can be addressed.

Additionally, New Mexico recently created the [Office of Broadband Access and Expansion](#) and the [Connect New Mexico Council](#) to better coordinate broadband deployment efforts among different state entities. The [Statewide Education Technology Infrastructure Network](#) will also create a system of regional connection nodes throughout the state, acting as a connectivity [launching point](#) for schools, homes and local community members. The first of these regional hubs has already been created at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

In 2021, the state's [general appropriations act](#) included \$100 million in appropriations for the Connect New Mexico fund. This included \$70 million for broadband infrastructure, \$5 million for tribes and \$25 million to develop broadband infrastructure for public schools statewide. Also in 2021, [H.B. 2](#) appropriated \$123 million from the federal American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 to expand broadband statewide.

Outcomes and Progress

In the last few years, New Mexico has seen significant gains in students' access to the internet and devices. For example, in 2019, 70% of fourth grade students and 82% of eighth grade students [reported](#) having access to the internet and a device at home. By 2022, those numbers increased to 81% and 90% respectively, which reflect the largest increases in the nation. Expedited connectivity expansion projects are [reported](#) to have resulted in the state "providing devices for 131,000 students in need and helping over 119,000 households register for federal broadband subsidy programs" These expansion efforts especially benefitted Indigenous students, students with disabilities, students who are English learners and students from low-income backgrounds.

New Mexico has also continued efforts to connect community members and schools to federal subsidies and expansion projects such as the [Affordable Connectivity Program](#), the [Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment Program](#), and [E-Rate](#). In March 2023, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham [announced](#) that the state distributed \$17 million in federal grant awards and leveraged \$7 million of matching contributions to bridge the digital divide in underserved, economically distressed communities. Targeted use of federal funds will continue in the near future; between 2022 and 2026, New Mexico is [projected](#) to allocate \$644 million of federal funds for internet and device access. Additionally, in June 2023, the U.S. Department of Commerce [announced](#) additional state allocations for high-speed internet grant programs, including \$675 million in New Mexico.

New Mexico still has a long road to travel to ensure every student has sufficient access to internet connections and digital devices. Ongoing efforts to gather detailed connectivity data are needed to inform future work and bridge the disparities across underserved student populations. However, the state has made significant progress in recent years. The policy infrastructure it has established, its use of significant targeted investments with both state and federal funds, and its ability to tap into existing state and federal efforts have put in place a system of access expansion that other states may be able to learn valuable lessons from.