

Your Question:

You asked for examples of task forces addressing the digital divide issue.

Our Response:

Virtual learning and the digital divide are topics of interest among many policy leaders. This interest has intensified as the COVID-19 pandemic continues and many more states and school districts consider future virtual education options as well as the equity implications of distance learning. Student access to both internet and technology resources are essential to closing the digital divide. Below you'll find examples of digital divide task forces. You'll also find some examples of other state policies related to the digital divide and a couple additional resources. Education Commission of the States' [COVID-19 Update page](#) includes a "Broadband and Technology Access" section that you may find useful. Additionally, Education Commission of the States will continue to update our [policy tracking](#) page, which includes bills related to task forces and technology.

State Examples: Task Forces

California: In April 2020, State Superintendent Tony Thurmond [announced](#) the creation of a task force to close the digital divide. According to the announcement, "the Closing the Digital Divide Task Force will help facilitate donations, create more publicity, and cast a bigger spotlight on those who can help. It also plans to hold a public hearing where internet service providers may be called upon to testify on their efforts to improve internet access during the pandemic."

Illinois: [H.B. 5752](#) (enacted, 2018) created the Broadband Advisory Council to explore ways to expand broadband access throughout the state, including unserved and underserved areas. Among many topics of exploration, the council is charged with exploring ways to increase use of broadband for the purpose of education. The [Illinois Broadband Advisory Council](#) issued a [report](#) in February 2020. The report discusses the Connect Illinois vision and proposes increasing broadband access to K-12 and higher education institutions with open access fiber network connections.

Texas: In May 2020, Gov. Greg Abbott, the Texas Education Agency and Dallas Independent School District (DISD) launched the Operation Connectivity Task Force. The [announcement](#) stated "the Operation Connectivity Task Force will gather critical information to determine which children in the state do not have internet access and/or home devices, document best practices, identify and secure technology solutions for broadband and devices, develop actionable playbooks for districts across the state, identify funding needs and help secure resources, demonstrate 'lighthouse' examples, including at DISD, and push for federal and state-level policies that connect more students learning at home to available technology resources."

Utah: [H.B. 11](#) (enacted, 2018) created the Digital Teaching and Learning Grant Program and Task Force. This bill requires the Digital Teaching and Learning Task Force to develop a funding proposal to present to the Legislature for digital teaching and learning in elementary and secondary schools. Requires the Digital Teaching and Learning Task Force Program be designed to: 1) improve student outcomes through the use of digital teaching and learning technology, and 2) provide high quality professional learning for educators to improve student outcomes through the use of digital teaching and learning technology. Requires the state board of education to develop outcome-based metrics, minimum benchmark standards and a plan for statewide implementation, among other things. Requires the

Utah Education and Telehealth Network in consultation with the board, to conduct an inventory of the state public education system's current technology resources and other items, perform an engineering study to determine the technology infrastructure needs of the public education system to implement a digital teaching and learning program, and, as funding allows, provide infrastructure and technology support for school districts and charter schools. The Utah State Board of Education provides an [overview](#) and additional information about the Digital Teaching and Learning initiative and grant program.

[State Examples: Other Relevant Policy](#)

Alaska: [S.B. 74](#) (enacted, 2020) provides subsidized internet services for certain school districts and increases the subsidized megabits of download per second from 10 to 25.

California: [A.B. 2626](#) (pending) would require the California Research Bureau to conduct research on ways to close the digital divide through policies, including tax policies that reduce the upfront costs of devices and communications technology purchased by local educational agencies to provide students with equitable access to distance learning.

Maine: [L.D. 576](#) (enacted, 2019) requires the department of education to establish a working group to study and develop an online platform to facilitate the provision of online, virtual instruction by state-certified teachers to students in every public school and the provision of a variety of professional development opportunities to educators. It also requires the department to report to the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs on progress toward and obstacles to development, expected costs and a strategy for implementation of the online platform. The Maine Department of Education released a [report](#) in January 2020.

New Jersey: [A.3842](#) (vetoed, 2020) would have established the Bridging the Digital Divide in Schools Grant Program. The program would have provided and expanded access to technology and equipment for students in certain school districts. The bill would have allocated funds for technology such as laptops, hot spot access and other electronic mobile devices for students.

[Additional Resources:](#)

[Broadband Access and Implications for Efforts to Address Equity Gaps in Postsecondary Attainment](#) — Education Commission of the States, 2016. This report outlines the challenges confronting policy leaders who seek to leverage online distance education.

[A State Policymaker's Guide to Equitable Transitions in the COVID-19 Era](#) — Education Commission of the States, 2020. Pages 10 and 11 of the report cover digital access and digital learning. This report includes information around access as well as policy action ideas.