



**Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Public Hearing Regarding
Net Neutrality**

**Presented to the
House and Senate Democratic Policy Committees
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**By
Hollie Woodard
English Teacher and Technology Coach
Council Rock School District**

Good morning, Senator Cappelletti, Representative Fielder, and members of the House and Senate Democratic Policy Committees. Thank you for holding today’s important hearing on digital equity. Additionally, let me express my appreciation to Chairman Bizzarro and Chairwoman Muth for inviting me to testify this morning.

My name is Hollie Woodard. I am a high school English teacher and technology coach from the Council Rock School District, and today I am representing the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). I have a master’s degree in Information Technology and helped to build a virtual program in our district eight years ago -- long before distance learning became a popular topic of conversation. Additionally, I serve as the Advocacy Chair for PAECT (Pennsylvania Association for Educational Communications and Technology), as a member of the Pennsylvania Teacher Advisory Committee, as founder of the Dyslexia Teacher Taskforce, and as a Keystone Technology Innovator. I am also proud to state that I am a 2022 finalist for Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year.

Imagine telling the NFL, in the middle of their season, that they must complete the rest of their season in a swimming pool. That’s what happened to teachers last March when public schools were physically shut down and the 2019-2020 school year continued on a virtual basis as a result of dangers associated with COVID-19. In theory, changing the setting of education should not have that big of an impact; however, if you view the change through the lens of an NFL player trying to adapt to playing in water, you might be able to get a sense of the overwhelming adjustment teachers had to make within the last year in shifting from face-to-face instruction to remote learning. Technically it was still instruction, but now it had to be done from cyberspace -- something most teachers had no experience with prior to 2020.

When assessing digital equity, there are three factors to consider:

1. Access to devices other than a cell phone;
2. Access to high-speed broadband internet or Wi-Fi; and
3. Properly trained teachers.

When the doors to my school closed on March 13, 2020, my district was poised for the challenge because of our access. As one of the wealthiest districts in the state, all students and staff had access to devices on day one and we were able to provide a device to any student who needed one. In addition, because of our geographical location between two major cities, Philadelphia and Trenton, our families had access to Wi-Fi. With these two things covered, the focus of our district primarily became providing students with access to properly trained teachers.

Unfortunately, many public schools weren’t as prepared as Council Rock on March 13, 2020 to respond immediately and seamlessly to the remote learning challenges presented by the pandemic.

- Underfunded schools in low-income areas, both rural and urban, did not have access to devices and could not provide students the basic tools they needed to learn in a virtual setting.
- Access to Wi-Fi or high-speed broadband internet became the burden of the family to provide. There were students who were denied instruction because their families lacked the economic or geographical means to access consistent Wi-Fi necessary to engage in online learning.
- Schools had not yet engaged in a professional development strategy to properly train all educators for virtual instruction.

Today, as the 2020-2021 school year draws to a close and the hope for a return to in-person instruction seems like a possibility, it is important to heed the lessons we learned from the past year and prioritize digital equity from a statewide policy perspective. In fact, I would argue that the need is far greater than it was before the pandemic. The pandemic showed us what many involved in information technology suspected but couldn't definitively prove. It exposed many deficiencies and our collective lack of preparedness as an education system. To ignore what we learned over the past year or to fail to adopt a statewide plan to fix those deficiencies would be a grave disservice to students, educators, and taxpayers.

Pandemic teaching and learning will result in learning deficits, as even the best trained teachers in the most prepared districts were not able to cover the anticipated course frameworks because of the constant changes in setting that occurred this year. Anecdotally, my students and I experienced the following instructional models over the past year:

1. A total school shutdown;
2. Asynchronous full virtual learning;
3. Full synchronous virtual learning;
4. Hybrid group rotation with live streaming; and
5. Full in-person learning with a shortened lunch-free schedule and a live stream component.

With each change to the learning environment, my students and I had to adapt to the setting, like the players on an NFL football team experiencing a learning curve while adapting to playing football in water. We have needed time to adapt at each transition point. That lost time will result in a decrease of skill and content mastery. While I can testify that my students have learned this year, we have not and will not complete the anticipated scope and sequence of the course outline.

This decrease in learning will create problems for schools, teachers, and students that will require innovation. That innovation will involve increased use of and dependence upon technology, because teachers will need tools to help efficiently assess student mastery and develop a

personalized learning plan to meet each individual student’s needs. Our existing understanding of the skills and content knowledge that students should be bringing to class is no longer reliable. To be successful, teachers will have to assess each and every child’s mastery and develop a personal plan to meet that child’s needs.

To accommodate the augmented need for assessment and personalized learning, student success will become dependent upon the utilization of Learning Management Systems (LMS). The best way to think about a learning management system is to imagine quite literally a virtual classroom where all the learning, communication, assessment, and grading takes place. Technology is not a luxury, nor is it an “alternative” approach to learning. I think some people understood that to be true prior to the pandemic, but clearly if the pandemic has done one thing it has accelerated the understanding and acceptance of that simple principle. Technology integrated into the principles of teaching and learning is essential for students to thrive and succeed. Technology can enhance the delivery of instruction, support all areas of the curriculum, and support the educational needs of students, staff, and community.

But again, recovering from the pandemic-related learning deficit and achieving future student success is still dependent on having properly trained teachers. Coming back to my pool analogy, many of my colleagues were treading water this year in terms of the use of technology for instruction. Honestly, some were drowning. All of us need to become professional swimmers moving forward. Therefore, the Commonwealth needs to prioritize a strategy to provide or enhance continual, job-embedded, high-quality professional development for all educators to enhance their comfort and utilization of classroom technology integration. Technological professional learning should be focused on effective pedagogy and application to instruction. Schools need the resources to offer skills-based and curriculum-integrated professional development opportunities, collaborative initiatives, and programs and tools that are up-to-date and relevant for a 21st century teaching and learning environment. And yes, this needs to be a state-led initiative. If we rely on individual districts or other public schools to lead on this front, educator professional development focused on information technology will inevitably fall into the equity gap, as some schools will have the financial resources and staff bandwidth to tackle the problem and some won’t.

Right now, throughout the Commonwealth, there are kindergarten through third grade students who have been deemed “The Alpha Generation.” Defined by their desire to create, they are device in-hand children, as they have spent their entire lives with a device in their hands. Now, as a result of COVID-19, they have actually spent more of their school time online than they have in a traditional classroom. When the dust settles and education returns to business as usual, their expectation will be technology-rich lessons led by teachers armed with 21st century instructional strategies and pedagogies. We’re not ready to meet that demand yet, but we will be with your help.

I'm hopeful that I've provided you with compelling information to motivate your dedication to ensuring digital equity for our students. There is one final thought I'd like to leave you with this morning. Prior to the pandemic, we used to say that denying a student a device to complete their schoolwork is like denying them a pencil to use in class. Now, denying a student access to a device is like denying them access to their classroom. We cannot continue to delay investments in or the prioritization of digital equity. Our students' future is quite literally dependent on all of us heeding the lessons from the pandemic. Thank you for your consideration of my comments. I will be happy to answer any of your questions.