



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Shelley B. Mayer

Senator Mayer & Advocates Announce E-LEARN Act to Provide Free, High-Quality Broadband to Every Student and School in New York State During the COVID-19 Emergency

SHELLEY B. MAYER November 24, 2020

| ISSUE: **DIGITAL DIVIDE, REMOTE LEARNING, BROADBAND ACCESS, E-LEARN**



[Click here for video footage of the announcement.](#)

On Tuesday, November 24th, Senator Shelley B. Mayer (D-Westchester), Senator John Liu (D-Queens), Senator Pete Harckham (Westchester, Putnam, Dutchess), and education advocates announced the introduction of the E-LEARN Act, a bill which would provide free, high-quality broadband to every student and school in New York State during the COVID-19

emergency.

The E-LEARN Act, or E-Let's Expand Access to Remote Learning Now Act, begins to address the “digital divide” that was already a significant problem for low-income and minority students and districts in cities, suburbs and rural areas throughout the state.

The legislative proposal is founded on the premise that remote learning has exacerbated the ‘digital divide’ and threatens the state’s ability to meet its Constitutional requirement to provide a “free common school” education for all the children of the state. Whether schools are fully remote or in a hybrid model, families and students need broadband to make remote learning work.

Given the state’s dire fiscal situation, ensuring all students receive a constitutionally-required education during the pandemic requires shared sacrifice by broadband providers. The E-LEARN program is funded through an assessment on the annual intrastate revenue of Telecommunications Service Providers (TSPs). By focusing on intrastate revenue (gross revenue within the State of New York), the bill addresses federal preemption concerns and does not include an interstate component.

All students ages 5-21 in public, private, charter, independent, approved private special education schools and those who are homeschooled are eligible for the E-LEARN program. Upon State Education Department (SED) approval, schools/districts arrange for broadband for students at their place of residence, including homeless shelters and foster care institutions, and school buildings without prior service. For students that already have

broadband at their residences, the Public Service Commission (PSC) will direct TSPs to reduce the broadband cost for that household by the per student eligibility.

Senator Shelley B. Mayer, Chair of the Senate Education Committee, said, “In the face of the COVID Pandemic, every child—whether in full remote learning, or hybrid learning, or even in school learning—must have quality broadband in order to be educated. You simply can’t learn or do your homework without it. Today, broadband access is essential to ensuring a sound, basic education for every student. I am pleased to sponsor the E-LEARN bill which secures free, quality, internet for every student age 5 to 21 at their residence, whether they live in a house, apartment, homeless shelter, or elsewhere. I encourage Telecommunications Service Providers to work with us. Broadband providers should share the burden of the pandemic with New Yorkers and give back to ensure every child has an equal start.”

In September, Senator Mayer co-authored [an OpEd in the Albany Times Union](#) about ensuring that families have the necessary broadband and child care resources to make schooling work during the Coronavirus Pandemic. She has met with school teachers, parents, superintendents and advocates throughout the state who have demanded the state respond to this fundamental inequity in our current education system.

Senator John Liu, Chair of the NYC Education Committee, said “The COVID-19 pandemic made crystal clear that broadband access is a necessity for students in New York, and yet many children across our state still cannot connect to the internet. As we head into a second wave and a long winter ahead, we must ensure that remote learning is accessible to all. The E-LEARN bill will provide broadband access to all students during this state of emergency. This small investment in connectivity will ensure that no child falls into the digital divide.”

Senator Jen Metzger, D-Hudson Valley, said “Long before COVID-19, lack of access to high-speed internet had limited economic and educational opportunities in rural districts like mine. If we want to ensure equal opportunity in today’s world and chip away at inequalities in education, then we need to make sure that every student has access to this essential resource and tool for learning. As the Senate sponsor of the Comprehensive Broadband Connectivity Act passed earlier in this session, I want to thank Senator Mayer for introducing the E-LEARN bill, which will address the immediate internet needs of children across the state during this pandemic, and I urge that it be passed expeditiously.”

Senator Pete Harckham, D-Westchester, Putnam, Dutchess, said, “The best way to eliminate educational inequity is by ensuring excellent resources and technologies are available for all students throughout the state. Thanks to the E-LEARN Act, guaranteed broadband access in students’ homes will help level the playing field to a large extent for those in low-income and underserved communities, as well as in rural areas. This necessary initiative to bridge the ‘broadband divide’ while the Covid-19 pandemic persists will benefit students immediately, and Sen. Mayer deserves our thanks for her vision and efforts in seeing this through.”

Senator James Skoufis, D-Hudson Valley, said, "The state ought to facilitate high-quality broadband for every single student throughout the duration of the pandemic, period. Anything less is neglecting the needs of the very students whose education has already been significantly interrupted - simply because they live in a particular zip code. I'm proud to be supporting this legislation with my colleagues and will continue to work alongside Senator Mayer as she spearheads this important effort."

Dr. Frances Wills, New York State Regent for the 9th Judicial District, said, “It is my personal opinion that the policy goal of Senator Mayer's E-LEARN legislation is most laudable and much needed because it ensures accessible, affordable and high quality broadband internet for New York State students and their families, critical to ensuring educational equity, particularly in response to the disruption of in person schooling during this devastating pandemic.”

Andy Pallotta, President of the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT), said, “Remote learning continues to be a needed option for school districts during this pandemic, but we know that there are far too many students who lack access to high-quality broadband, either because it is cost prohibitive for their families or the infrastructure simply isn’t available to them. Every child deserves access to a high-quality education, and that includes access to the digital resources necessary for 21st Century learning. Sen. Mayer’s bill is an important step toward tackling the digital divide that communities across New York face.”

Michael Mulgrew, President of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), said, "The pandemic has shown what educators have known for years: Access to broadband is a necessity and should be considered a public responsibility, like clean water. We applaud Senator Shelley B. Mayer for tackling this inequity and we look forward to working with her to make sure all our students have the resources they need to succeed."

Rev. Frank E. Coleman Jr., President of the Yonkers NAACP, said, “As President of the Yonkers NAACP, I am perpetually grateful to our political public servants such as State Senator Shelley B. Mayer, who always has our community in her heart and mind concerning our

great needs. Thank you again, Senator Mayer for coming through for us."

Willie J. Trotman, President, Spring Valley NAACP, said "The disproportionate impact on children of color resulting from COVID-19 underpins the urgency of Senator Shelley Mayer's E-LEARN legislation. Remote learning requires a laptop computer and internet access. For many children of color, it's the equivalent of excluding them from school. For all intent and purpose, the E-LEARN bill is a civil rights bill and must be passed."

Jeffrey Pirozzolo, President of the New York Association of Small City School Districts (NYSASCSD) and Superintendent of the Auburn Enlarged City School District, said "Now more than ever it is essential for all students to receive fair and equitable educational opportunities. We must overcome all hindrances and provide connectivity to all students and families."

Mary Fox-Alter, Superintendent of Pleasantville Union Free School District representing the Lower Hudson Education Council, said, "The Lower Hudson Education Coalition strongly believes that the provision of free, high quality broadband to every student and school in New York State is vital to ensuring students have equal opportunity to learn and thrive, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the digital divide has truly been exposed across the State. We thank Senator Mayer and her colleagues for addressing this issue head on."

Karen Belanger, Executive Director, Westchester Putnam School Boards Association (WPSBA), said, "All students need access to home and school broadband service to support learning in the digital age. As the pandemic has highlighted the educational inequities and disparity of access to reliable internet at home, the Westchester Putnam School Boards Association

supports the proposed legislation of Senator Shelley Mayer and the state legislators who are working to expand reliable, affordable broadband across New York."

Jennifer K. Pyle, Executive Director, Conference of Big 5 School Districts, said "On behalf of the Buffalo, New York City, Rochester, Syracuse, Yonkers, Albany, Mount Vernon and Utica public school districts, the Conference of Big 5 School Districts thanks Senator Mayer for her unwavering commitment to advancing a solution to the critical issue of the digital divide and it's disproportionate impact on the state's urban centers. Our school districts continue to work tirelessly to provide continuity of academic instruction and to serve the unique needs of their communities during these unprecedented and difficult times. The Big 5 members are heavily reliant on state aid and serve the majority of the state's most vulnerable students. It is imperative that the state ensure that all children have the resources required to engage in learning regardless of their instructional modality. We applaud Senator Mayer for her steadfast efforts to address the glaring disparities in connectivity rates across the state."

Allison Lake, Executive Director of the Westchester Children's Association, said, "Families and school districts throughout Westchester have access to different resources. Westchester Children's Association has heard first hand through our surveying of parents and many partnerships- there is tremendous need to access Wi-Fi and devices, as well as quality digital literacy training that enables students to get the most out of remote learning. The E-LEARN bill is a first step in bringing equity to our children and closing the digital divide in Westchester and New York State."

Elizabeth Llanos, a mother of three from White Plains, NY, said "The district provided us with tablets, but I do not have internet service, so they can't use them. Right now, they try to

complete their schoolwork and connect to their teachers by cell phone. I have to leave my phone home when I go to work, so that they each have access to their assignments. If I cannot pay my cell phone bill and the service gets turned off, they are not able to log on and participate in class. This assistance will make a huge difference for my children's education!"

Kerry Whelan-Megley, Executive Director of Family Ties of Westchester, said, "The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the deep fault-lines which divide American families by income and race. Nowhere is this inequity more visible than in the lack of high-quality, if any, broadband access for thousands of Westchester families living in under-served communities. As the virus surges and more schools close and more children stay home, the lack of reliable internet exacerbates educational disparities for a generation of children. It is time to tear down the digital divide."

Samantha Rosado-Ciriello, President of the Yonkers Federation of Teachers, said "As this pandemic has underscored inequities across our society, the digital divide among our students and families has widened to a canyon," Yonkers Federation of Teachers President Samantha Rosado-Ciriello said. "Far too many Yonkers students are relying on costly cell phone data plans or simply going without access to the technology they need for remote learning because they lack affordable, reliable broadband access. Providing every student equal access to 21st Century learning opportunities is essential, and this legislation represents a welcome step toward addressing the inequality in our school system."

Beth Sniffen, Westchester-East Putnam PTA Region Director, NYS PTA, said "I want to thank Senator Shelley Mayer and Senator John Liu for taking on this initiative. COVID-19 has really unmasked with remote learning the extent of digital inequity that exists with our

students. We want ALL children to have an equal opportunity to be successful learners.”

Vanessa Agudelo, Hudson Valley Manager of Member Engagement, New York Immigration Coalition, said "As every New York family continues to struggle with the pandemic and remote learning, immigrant and low-income families continue to disproportionately carry the brunt of the impact. Without access to home internet or broadband connections, thousands of children are being left behind by the digital divide. The only way for New York State to make good on its constitutional promise to provide a sound education to every student is to ensure free, high-quality broadband is available to every student and school in New York State during the COVID-19 emergency.”

Ian Rosenblum, Executive Director of EdTrust, said, “Almost half of New York State's parents are worried about whether their family will be able to afford internet access this school year, at a time when it is essential for remote learning. We are grateful to Senator Mayer for leading this important effort to connect students to high speed internet, a critical step for promoting educational equity during the pandemic.”

Dr. Harold Coles, District Superintendent of the Southern Westchester BOCES, said "Senator Mayer is to be applauded for casting a spotlight on the crucial issue of digital equity. While the school districts of the Southern Westchester BOCES region are deeply affected by this divide in broadband internet access, it is hardly a mere local issue. Rather it is one that touches rural, suburban and urban school communities alike across New York. It is also a need that precedes and will continue even after the current pandemic.”

Robert Schneider, Executive Director, New York State School Boards Association, said “The need to reduce the digital divide is even more apparent with the ongoing learning roadblocks through this pandemic. Students must be provided quality education through the use of the internet and mobile devices when being in the school building is not an option. We appreciate the interest by Senator Mayer and her legislative colleagues on this important issue and we will continue working with her on this endeavor.”

Charles Dedrick, Executive Director, New York State Council of School Superintendents, said "Since school buildings were closed to in-person instruction last spring, superintendents have become acutely knowledgeable about gaps in internet access among the families their schools serve. Districts have made heroic efforts to create hotspots and to intervene for families with internet companies. But gaps persist. We commend Senator Mayer for her leadership on this issue and will work with her toward solutions."

Amanda Grace Wing, Interim Executive Director of the New York State Association of School Business Officials (NYSASBO), said “In the 21st century, a sound, basic education requires technological fluency and digital literacy. The pandemic has highlighted an important fact: broadband access is not a luxury, it is a necessity. Our school districts have spent in technology to facilitate remote learning, but ensuring all students can access broadband at home calls for state action. ASBO and its members applaud Senator Mayer’s leadership in this fight and look forward to working with all stakeholders to ensure that New York fills its constitutional responsibility to provide a sound education to all students.

Angela Siefer, Executive Director of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), said, "The

pandemic has exposed the fact that so many students and their families cannot afford home internet service. This cost barrier to home internet is a big problem that must be addressed with big solutions. NDIA celebrates State Senator Mayer's focus on this digital inequity and her big solution."

John Windhausen, Executive Director of the Schools, Health & Libraries Broadband (SHLB)

Coalition, said, "The classroom is now at home. But 27 percent of New York's K-12 students are missing school because they don't have adequate internet access. The SHLB Coalition applauds State Senator Mayer for introducing the E-LEARN bill, which would connect these students with the broadband necessary to keep their education on track. The bill wisely recognizes the key role that schools and districts can play in closing this 'learning gap.'"